

# THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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## **BMOP's Survey of Kirchner's Orchestral Music**



courtesy of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project

At the end of last September, BMOP/sound, the “house label” for the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), celebrated its 60th release with an album consisting entirely of orchestra music by Leon Kirchner. Prepared by conductor Gil Rose, the “program” of the album consists of five of Kirchner’s orchestral compositions presented in chronological order. Since the earliest of these, a sinfonia in two parts played without interruption, was composed in 1951, while the latest, the orchestral version of “The Forbidden,” was premiered on October 16, 2008, the recording, taken as a whole, accounts for over 50 years of Kirchner’s life and approaches to composition.

Appointed in 1961 to succeed Walter Piston, Kirchner was on the faculty at Harvard University during the entire interval of time I spent as both undergraduate and graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I interacted with him on only a few occasions during the period when Elliott Carter had a Visiting Professor appointment at MIT; and I was probably responsible for introducing Kirchner to my thesis advisor, Marvin Minsky, who is cited as an influence in Joel Fan’s essay for the booklet accompanying the BMOP album. Indeed, it was through Kirchner that both

Minsky and I had our first contact with a Buchla synthesizer, being used by Morton Subotnick to prepare the “electronic accompaniment” for Kirchner’s third string quartet.

Nevertheless, my awareness of Kirchner’s music was pathetically limited during my student days and even weaker over the course of the decades to follow. Indeed, while I wrote about an album of his chamber music, planned by Fan, for Examiner.com in January of 2013, Kirchner’s music never really registered on my radar until the Telegraph Quartet began to perform his first string quartet regularly in their recitals, eventually including it on their first album. Since then I have dropped hints on several occasions suggesting that covering the full canon of Kirchner’s quartets would be an admirable project.

All this should explain why I was totally unfamiliar with all of the selections on the recent BMOP album. From a listener’s point of view, these selections make for a listening experience entirely different from that of Kirchner’s chamber music. If there are those who felt that Kirchner’s first string quartet could be taken for Béla Bartók’s seventh, the two orchestral works from the Fifties, the *sinfonia* (1951) and a *toccata* scored for strings, solo winds, and percussion (1955), seem, at least to my ears, to tweak memories of the rich full-orchestra writing encountered in the music of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. Those associations are, of course, little more than tweaks; but they still provide a framework in which the uniqueness of Kirchner’s voice can be appreciated.

However, Kirchner himself was never one to let his anchor rest in a single place. As a result I must confess that I am still working to orient myself when listening to the two pieces on this album both called “Music for Orchestra.” For that matter, Fan’s performance of the original solo piano version of “The Forbidden” has not yet made a deep enough impression for me to comprehend at any significant depth how it relates to the orchestral version on this new album.

In other words there is no legitimate way in which Kirchner’s music can, or should be, taken for background music. This is not for listening while comfortably stretched out on the couch or sitting in your favorite armchair. Indeed, the attentiveness I cultivated for listening to the first quartet came primarily from several recital experiences, rather than

from the recently released recording. So, to bring this matter of informed listening closer to home, I would like to observe that the 1955 toccata was premiered by the San Francisco Symphony (SFS) on February 16, 1956, back when Kirchner was teaching at Mills College and Enrique Jordá was SFS Music Director. After that, it looks like Kirchner's music was put on hold until Michael Tilson Thomas conducted his 1969 "Music for Orchestra" piece in May of 1998.

I am not sure I am up for waiting out another interval of 42 years before the next opportunity arises. However, if that is what it takes, then the best I can do is hold up my side of the bargain by living a healthy life! Fortunately, I can use the time to cultivate a richer familiarity with Kirchner's music as performed by BMOP.